Text: Acts 22:22-29
Title: The Start of Paul's Trials
Truth: We, like Paul, can exercise our rights as citizens, especially for the progress of the gospel of Christ.
Date/Location: Wednesday 3/12/2014 FBC conference call due to snow storm and 3/26/2025 at FBC via livestream only due to water service line repair.

Introduction

Paul had just given a public testimony to a large group of hostile Jewish people who were zealous toward God (22:3), but without knowledge (Romans 10:2–4).

I. Response of the Crowd, v. 22-23

A. The crowd listened intently to Paul up to the point that he said he was sent by God to the Gentiles. Then they raised their voices against Him. Because the connection to non-Jews upsets them, they give evidence of ethnocentrism or racism. This is a sin-disease that the world suffers from, but it is not to be so in the church. Consider these verses: Galatians 3:28, Acts 10:34-35, Col. 3:11, James 2:9, Rev. 7:9, Rom. 2:11, Deut. 10:17, Acts 17:26; Lev. 19:33-34.

B. They wanted Paul dead. And why? For a religious crime? And one that they could not prove? How ridiculous this was became evident as Paul was tried later in the Jewish and Roman courts. There was nothing they could find him guilty of that was worthy of death. So it was with Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14). The crowd lacked a sense of proportion, for the punishment to fit the crime. We should be well past the time and circumstance for executing people for their beliefs, even if they are very wrong beliefs. Such still happens under repressive regimes but it has nothing to do with Jesus's direction to turn the other cheek or to not call fire down from heaven to devour them (Luke 9:54).

C. The crowd was so emotional about it they tore their clothes and threw dust in the air. But they could not get at Paul because the Roman soldiers would overpower them to protect their prisoner. But the mob did what it could to cause a disturbance.

II. Paul Rescued by Virtue of His Roman Citizenship, v. 24-29

A. The commander ordered his underlings to get the facts out of Paul by whipping them out of him. Torture is a reality in this sin-cursed world, but it is not a really great way to get information, and certainly not in a situation like this. Just ask the man questions before you start hitting

him. Paul is an honest fellow, and they could ascertain that by asking some questions. It is always a mystery to me why the commander did not take one of the ringleaders of the mob and scourge *that person* to see "why they shouted so against him." Why is Paul presumed to be the guilty party?

B. Paul asks a question of the centurion about the legality of scourging a Roman who is not condemned. The answer to the question was that it was NOT legal, and Paul knew this but presented it as a question. Roman citizens were exempt from "cruel and unusual" forms of questioning.

The penalty for falsely claiming Roman citizenship was death by beheading, so Paul would not make that claim unless it were true (See Appendix 1). The penalty for a soldier treating a citizen as a non-citizen was also very severe.

I wonder about this. Can we righteously say that a human being created in the image of God deserves a *lesser* standard of treatment simply because they do not have the citizenship status or paperwork? This is a question that has been current in our own day: are terrorists subject to different basic treatment than citizens, say when it comes to incarceration? Are illegal migrants subject to disparate treatment, say when it comes to hearings for deportation? Are rights endowed by the creator *only* applicable to US citizens? And if yes, why not to *all* people who have the same creator and the same endowments?

C. The soldier took the citizenship news to the commander to warn him that the prisoner was a citizen. He probably cared to know because if he did this wrong, he would be in big trouble (lose his job or life).

D. The commander verified the truth of Paul's claim. The question, "Tell me, are you a Roman" was an official legal question, an inquiry that he had probably made dozens of times before to prisoners.

E. The answer: Paul was a natural born citizen. The commander knew the value of this citizenship, because he had to buy (or bribe to obtain) his citizenship and enjoy its privileges. Paul was sort of "one up" on the commander in that regard. God had prepared this before Paul was even born, not only for Paul's benefit but also for the sake of the gospel. Paul could have died as a result of the beating. Furthermore, Paul was thus launched onto a trajectory that would get him to Rome.

Roman citizens were exempt from the more cruel and unusual methods used by the soldiers.

E. The commander was afraid that he would be found out or Paul would "tell on him" that he threatened to mistreat a natural-born Roman citizen. Luke says even the fact that he had *bound* Paul in preparation for the *flagellum* was cause enough for him to get into trouble with his superiors. So the torturers left Paul alone—they hardly needed a command, because they would be in hot water if they mistreated a Roman citizen.

This fear put Paul on a good footing because he had something to hold over the commander's head, so to speak. Of course, a righteous person would not actually blackmail a government authority, but the situation did result in the commander and Paul having a good "understanding" of one another.

Application

A. I suggest that like Paul, we should exercise our citizenship rights, most especially for the advantage of the gospel and to avoid unjust treatment. We should not focus on using our citizenship rights to simply increase our comfort or our liberty to do sinful things or to disregard authority. Those are not righteous motivations.

B. As a western/American people, we have traditionally believed that these rights are encoded into our constitution and bill of rights because they belong to us inherently. The rights were not granted to us by government (as such, they could be taken away from us); rather the rights are natural rights granted by God and thus are to be protected by the government whose job is to restrain evil and promote good. In a sense, they are rights of "kindness" that each person should offer to others because of love of neighbor.

C. We must deal straightforwardly with the fact that such rights are not recognized across the globe. Those who have a religious fervor attached to their governing principles will not observe such proprieties in the prosecution of their aims. It is still true that sometimes we have to suffer, as did Jesus, and that without a word.

D. We also have to know when to forgo our rights or constrain our liberties for the sake of the gospel, or our testimony, or the wise use of our time.

E. This moves into the realm of the political, but it is necessary to touch upon it because it touches both us and the Bible. The legally recognized rights that Paul exercised were found in the Roman Valerian and Porcian laws. For us, our rights are recognized and encoded in our constitution. We must know those documents in order to know our rights.

F. For example, the First Amendment to our constitution:

> "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or [abridging the freedom] of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Notice carefully the six elements of this amendment. These are "first principles" for us as Americans. And we can use them to the advantage of the gospel and our peace. Those rights are not recognized, however, when we step outside of our country.

G. We ought to exercise these rights and lay claim to them when challenged. Following Paul's apostolic example, we *can legitimately do so as Christians*. It is not un-Christian to demand that the people who oppose you act in accordance with law and your rights and justice. It is un-Christian to do so in an un-Christian *manner*, but it is perfectly acceptable to do so in a respectful, upright manner.

H. Our constitution recognizes that we can peaceably assemble and freely exercise our faith. But do we do so? But what do we as a people generally do? We don't exercise any religion and we don't peaceably assemble for such! Our assemblies are largely for entertainment or political purposes. The Bible exhorts us to assemble together as believers and not to forsake doing that. Our rights include that we can freely speak. Do we do that to tell others of Christ? Do we write as press-agents for the Lord? Do we petition the government for grievances about its constraints on our faith practice, or do we just complain about it?

I. We could profitably think on this topic a lot more. There are 9 other amendments we could think about, as well as the entire main body of the constitution.

J. I leave you with this question: "How can you be a good *Christian citizen*?"

MAP

Appendix 1: Unverified Source, but Interesting

If you weren't a Roman citizen in the year 50 a.d in the Roman empire, what would prevent you from claiming that you were a Roman citizen? What kind of proof would people ask for?

The first thing people would ask for would be witnesses to support your claim under oath. If you weren't able to provide such witnesses because, for instance, you were far from home, people in authority might take

your word provisionally if you looked plausible, for instance if you had a "*tria nomina*" name: praenomen, nomen, cognomen, such as Gaius Julius Caesar or Lucius Aemilius Paulus, you had better be a citizen, because after 24 CE it was illegal to use such a name if you were not.

If they felt your claim was dubious in spite of provisionally accepting it, the authorities could check the census list from where you were living at the time of the last census. This could take time. They might have to dispatch somebody the length and breadth of the empire, which was not merely a slow process but an expensive one, so would probably wait until somebody was going that way anyway. If you had been made a citizen, rather than inheriting the status, you would have been given a *diploma* (if you received your citizenship on discharge from the army) or a *libellus* containing a copy of your entry in the archive at Rome (if you were a civilian). You might or might not be able to put your hand to this when you needed it: you want to send for it? Slow and expensive and the cost is on you this time.

There would have been a good deal of luck involved in whether your claim was entertained or not, and it might even be a matter of life or death. The bottom line was that the penalties were severe both for falsely claiming citizenship and for treating citizens as non-citizens in a legal context, so people tended not to make false claims and the authorities tended to admit claims that were made. But it wasn't a perfect system by any means.

https://www.quora.com/It-s-50-A-D-in-the-Roman-Empire-Whats-to-prevent-you-from-claiming-that-you-were-a-Roman-citizen-when-you-weren-t-What-kind-of-proof-would-people-ask-for